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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT'S IRAQ POLICY ADDRESS: ROK REACTIONS

REF: STATE 3592

11. (U) Summary: During a previously scheduled luncheon for new Vice Foreign Minister Cho Jung-pyo, the Ambassador reinforced the President's January 10 announcement on Iraq policy, emphasizing the President's appreciation for the contributions made by the ROK troops in Iraq. VFM Cho said that President Roh Moo-hyun greatly appreciated the telephone call from the President which conveyed in advance the substance of the President's address. President Roh fully supported the President's goal of transforming Iraq into a stable and prosperous democracy. End Summary.

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Reinforcing the President's Policy Address  
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12. (U) In a January 11 luncheon meeting with Vice Foreign Minister Cho Jung-pyo, Deputy Foreign Minister Shim Yoon-joe and Director-General Cho Tae-yong, the Ambassador explained the background, objectives and the strategic context behind the President's January 10 announcement on Iraq policy (Reftel). The Ambassador especially noted the significant contribution of the South Korean troops in Irbil. The President greatly appreciated the contributions of the South Korean Zaytun Brigade in Iraq; they were playing a vital role in achieving national reconciliation and stabilization in Iraq. Even with the projected reduction in their numbers, South Koreans were still the third largest contingent in the coalition, the Ambassador said.

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Bush-Roh Telecon  
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13. (SBU) VFM Cho said that he believed the President's address was timely and effective. President Roh greatly appreciated the call from President Bush, which gave him an early opportunity to discuss Iraq policy challenges. The conversation between the two Presidents, the fourteenth since President Roh took office in 2003, was warm and friendly. President Roh made it clear that he fully supported President Bush's strategy in Iraq.

14. (SBU) The call also provided an opportunity for the two Presidents to discuss North Korea issues, VFM Cho said. They agreed that the best way to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem was through diplomacy. President Roh reaffirmed that South Korea's rice and fertilizer assistance to the North would remain suspended until tangible progress was made on denuclearization, Cho said.

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Safety of Zaytun, ROK Embassy

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15. (SBU) DG Cho noted that late last year there had been considerable discussion in the ROKG and the National Assembly on the future of South Korean troops in Iraq. The conclusion was that developments in Iraq would be closely followed during this year; thereafter, the ROKG would have to make a decision on Korea's future role in Iraq, taking into account the situation on the ground and the policies of other coalition members, especially the United States. This strategy was quite consistent with President Bush's announcement, our MOFAT interlocutors noted. Asked about South Korean public perception, DG Cho said that as long as casualties among the troops in Zaytun could be avoided, he saw no problems with their continued deployment in Iraq.

16. (SBU) The Koreans were, however, interested in knowing whether the increased U.S. troops in Baghdad might lead to heightened clashes with insurgents that could affect the safety of ROK Embassy personnel. The Ambassador suggested the ROK Embassy consult with U.S. authorities on the ground.

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Comment  
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17. (SBU) South Koreans have always viewed their troop contribution to Iraq in the alliance context, similar to the ROK troops in Afghanistan (and in Vietnam three decades ago). Still, it has never been an easy political decision, especially because the ruling Uri Party largely opposes having troops in Iraq. On this issue, however, President Roh has been consistently supportive, because he knew instinctively the importance President Bush attaches to

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stability and democracy in Iraq. The President's advance call was undoubtedly a reaffirmation for President Roh that he had made the right decision.  
VERSHBOW